DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 486 SO 021 176

AUTHOR Patrick, John J.

TITLE Achievement of Knowledge by High School Students in Core Subjects of the Social Studies. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-SO-91-1
PUB DATE Jan 91
CONTRACT RI88062009
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Civics; *Core Curriculum; Economics Education; Geography Instruction; Grade 11; Grade 12; High Schools; *High School Students; *Knowledge Level; *Social Studies; United States History
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; *Joint Council on Economic Education; *National Assessment of Educational Progress

ABSTRACT

During 1990, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported findings about elementary and secondary school students' knowledge of U.S. history, geography, and civics. In 1988, the Joint Council on Economic Education reported findings from its national study of high school students' knowledge of economics. The designers and reporters of these national assessments have assumed that their instruments measured knowledge students should have learned through involvement with the social studies curriculum in elementary and secondary school. The synthesis of findings in this digest, however, is restricted to 11th and 12th graders, students who have completed most, if not all, of the social studies curriculum. The overall achievement of these upper level high school students in the core subjects of the social studies (history, geography, civics, and economics) is dismal. Factors identified that tend to produce better performances include a home environment where reading and information are valued, limited television viewing, classroom lessons that involve utilization of knowledge and higher level performances on tests of knowledge, teacher knowledge of the subject area, and strong programs of teacher in-service education. A 9-item resource list concludes the Digest. (Author/JH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED329486

Achievement of Knowledge by High School Students in Core Subjects of the Social Studies

by
John J. Patrick

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SO 021 176

ERIC®

Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education
2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47405 (812) 855-3838

ERIC Digest EDO-SO-91-1 January 1991

Achievement of Knowledge by High School Students in Core Subjects of the Social Studies

by John J. Patrick

During 1990, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported findings about elementary and secondary school students' knowledge of U.S. history, geography, and civics. In 1988, the Joint Council on Economic Education reported findings about its national study of high school students' knowledge of economics. The designers and reporters of these national assessments have assumed that their instruments measured knowledge students should have learned through involvement with the social studies curriculum in elementary and secondary school. The synthesis of findings in this Digest, however, is restricted to 11th and 12th graders—to students who have completed most, if not all, of the school's social studies curriculum. What do they know about core subjects of the social studies—U.S. history, geography, economics, and civics—after completion of most of their coursework?

High School Students' Knowledge of U.S. History. Most upper level high school students reveal serious gaps in their knowledge of major events and themes in U.S. history. In a 1986 assessment, eleventh-grade students responded to 141 multiple choice items on sixteen categories (e.g., the Constitution, civil rights, women in history, labor and industry, geography in history, and international relations). The average score was 54.5 percent correct.

The second national assessment of knowledge of history (reported in 1990) confirmed the findings of the first survey. The overall results of a trend study indicated essentially "no change from 1986 to 1988 in the high school juniors' factual knowledge of U.S. history" (NAEP 1990d, 8). A national sample of twelfth-grade students, who also participated in the second history assessment, performed generally at the same low level as did the eleventh-grade respondents. About half of them lacked understanding of key historical terms, fundamental primary documents, and significant relationships among facts and ideas in U.S. history. More than half of these respondents, for example, were ignorant of main ideas in the Declaration of Independence, Constitution of 1787, and Bill of Rights, and of their applications to issues in American history.

High School Students' Knowledge of Geography. A similar pattern of generally poor performance occurred in the national assessment of geographic knowledge (NAEPc 1990). The 76-item test measured knowledge of four topics: knowing locations, using geography skills and tools, understanding cultural geography, and understanding physical geography. Overall, the national sample of twelfth-grade students answered only 57 percent of these items correctly. Average scores for the four topics in the test ranged from 53 percent correct on geographic skills and tools to 60 percent correct in the cultural geography category.

Very few of the respondents had taken a high school course in geography. Most of them, however, had been exposed to some geography content in their history and science courses. Students whose American history courses included substantial treatment of geography performed better than the others on this assessment.

High School Students' Knowledge of Economics. High school students performed about as poorly in a Joint Council on Economic Education survey as similar respondents did in the NAEP tests of knowledge of history and geography. An assessment of 8,205 eleventh- and twelfth-grade students in private and public schools in 33 states revealed vast ignorance of key economic concepts, such as gross national product, inflation, monetary policy, and opportunity costs (Walstad & Soper 1988).

Respondents who had completed a high school course in economics had a mean score of only 52 percent correct answers on the Test of Economic Literacy. Students in social studies courses that included economics content had an average score of 48 percent. The average score of students in social studies courses without economics content was 37 percent correct. The greatest deficiency among all groups of respondents was their lack of knowledge of concepts in macroeconomics.

High School Students' Knowledge of Civics. By contrast to the assessments in other core subjects, a mixed picture of student achievement was revealed by the measurement of knowledge in civics (NAEP 1990b). The 144 items in this test were grouped into four categories: (1) democratic principles and the purpose of government, (2) structures and functions of political institutions, (3) political processes, and (4) rights, responsibilities, and the law. The highest mean score in any of the four categories was 78.9 percent correct on rights, responsibilities, and the law. Students tended to be well informed about constitutional rights of persons accused of a crime, and about the legal exercise and limits of free expression. They were markedly less informed about the sources of their civil liberties and rights in events and documents of the founding period of American history.

Mean scores (percentages) in three other categories of this test were rather low: category 1—61.4, category 2—63.6, and category 3—64.5. In particular, only about half of the twelfth-grade

John J. Patrick is Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Director of the Social Studies Development Center, and a Professor of Education at Indiana University.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

students demonstrated an adequate understanding of specific principles of constitutional democracy in the United States, such as federalism, separation of powers, and checks and balances, and of the applications of these principles in institutions and processes of government. A disturbing finding was that upper level high school students did "significantly less well" in civics in the 1988 assessment than their 1982 counterparts (NAEP 1990b, 13).

Factors Associated with Higher Achievement. Better performances in the NAEP studies about civics, geography, and history were associated with the following factors: educational attainment of parents, a home environment where reading and information are valued, a stable family structure, limited television viewing, and regular performance of school assignments at home. The NAEP studies also suggested relationships between classroom lessons involving utilization of knowledge and higher level performances on tests of knowledge in civics, geography, and history. For example, students who said their teachers required them to interpret and apply knowledge to the completion of tasks tended to score much higher on these assessments of knowledge than did respondents who reported that their lessons were limited mostly to reading and recalling the contents of textbook chapters. Students in government and civics courses who reported participation in mock trials or mock congressional hearings tended to perform at a higher level on the assessment of knowledge of civics than did students who were not involved in these kinds of activities.

Factors associated with higher scores on the Test of Economic Literacy were the teacher's knowledge of economics and the teacher's access to curriculum resources and on-going programs of in-service education in economics. Students with higher scores on the Test of Economic Literacy tended to have teachers with more completed coursework in economics. This relationship prevailed not only for teachers of separate courses in economics, but also for teachers of other subjects, such as history or government, who infused economics into their courses. Further, there was a positive relationship between teachers in school districts that have had strong programs of in-service education in economics and students with higher scores on the Test of Economic Literacy.

In general, systematic and stimulating exposure to fundamental knowledge in the core social studies subjects—history, geography, civics, and economics—is associated with higher scores on tests of knowledge in these academic disciplines. Students who reported more challenging contacts with key topics and ideas made higher scores on the tests of knowledge. One might also hypothesize that students' general lack of knowledge, as exhibited by the recent national assessments, diminishes their ability to develop and use skills in deliberation, discourse, critical thinking, and decision making—all of which are basic attributes of exemplary citizenship in a constitutional democracy. It would seem, for example, that students with little knowledge of the origins and development of the U.S. Constitution would be unlikely to achieve proficiency in analysis and appraisal of issues about constitutional rights. Moreover, it would seem that students who lack knowledge about civic participation would not be likely to have either strong orientations to or skills in this fundamental facet of democratic citizenship.

Conclusion. The overall achievement of upper level high school students in the core subjects of the social studies is dismal. Less than half of these students graduate from high school with in-depth knowledge and understanding of these core subjects—history, geography, civics, and economics. Fewer than ten percent appear to have the ability to use social studies knowledge to complete higher order intellectual tasks. A review of findings from twenty years of NAEP concludes: "The current levels of student achievement are unacceptably low for our country's needs and aspirations and for the personal goals of its citizens" (NAEP 1990a, 29). There is obviously a continuing need for substantial improvement in the teaching and learning of core social studies subjects.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system. They are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Square, Suite 110, Newington, Virginia 22153-2836; telephone numbers are 703-404-1400 and 800-443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below.

Agresto, John. "NEH Places Renewed Emphasis on History." OAH MAGAZINE OF HISTORY 2 (Winter 1986): 13. EJ 351 587.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. AMERICA'S CHALLENGE: ACCELERATING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1990a.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. THE CIVICS REPORT CARD. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1990b. ED 315 376.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. THE GEOGRAPHY LEARNING OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1990c. ED 315 317.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. THE U.S. HISTORY REPORT CARD. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1990d. ED 315 377.

Resnick, Daniel P., and Lauren B. Resnick. "Standards, Curriculum, and Performance: A Historical and Comparative Perspective." EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER 14 (April 1985): 5-20. EJ 317 701.

Rogers, Vincent R., and Chris Stevenson. "How Do We Know What Kids Are Learning in School? EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP 45 (February 1988): 68-75. EJ 368 832.

Walstad, William B., and John C. Soper. A REPORT CARD ON THE ECONOMIC LITERACY OF U.S. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS. New York: Joint Council on Economic Education, 1988. ED 310 005.

Zwick, Rebecca, and Kadriye Erickan. "Analysis of Differential Item Functioning in the NAEP History Assessment." JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL MEASUREMENT 26 (Spring 1989): 55-66. EJ 391 535.

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062009. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.